

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE CHURCH IN THE RURAL COMMUNITY

A Challenge, A Responsibility, and An Opportunity

By C. E. (Dan) Patch*

I realize that in 1952 most any place under 5,000 population is classified as rural, but rural is "of or pertaining to the country, as distinguished from a city or town." So, I am talking to you about a country or village community made up of country people, farmers for the most part -- farmers who have calloused hands; who must combat insects natural and imported; who are promised much in the spring by lending agencies, merchants, land, and government and then watch grafters get what should have been theirs in the fall; who buy at high prices and sell at whatever they can get. I am talking about a sturdy, stubborn, stable fellow who has to be shown; a fellow who almost sold his birth-right to the modern Jacobs but who is learning the lesson of independent thinking and action again and is fast taking his place again as the champion of independence and freedom.

He and his family, his neighbor and his neighbor's family, make up a community that once revolved around the church, the school, the country store, and the blacksmith shop. But this is no longer true. The schools are consolidated. The stores carry but few articles in comparison with yesteryear. The blacksmith shop has rotted. The church offers about the same program it offered fifty years ago.

The farmer does not live as he did fifty years ago. He has electric lights, modern household equipment, fixtures, gadgets, gas heat, radio, television, tractors, and machinery of every kind. However, he sees the futility of turning things over to outsiders. For today all too often he has no telephone, the half-rotted poles down the road testifying to his father's ingenuity, but all he has is a worn-out promise. In spite of the speed-up in his work by machinery, he must wait the appointed number of days for a crop to grow, an egg to hatch, a calf to become a cow. He waits for spring, summer, fall, and winter.

* This is the presidential address delivered at the Fourth Annual Church and Community Conference during Farm and Home Week at Mississippi State College, April 23, 1952. Mr. Patch is pastor of the Birmingham, Sherman, and Saltillo Baptist churches in Lee County, Mississippi. The church at Birmingham was recognized during 1951 Farm and Home Week as having excelled in community service.

Since God controls these forces, he feels that any change in the church program is messing with God's business. He forgets the great changes in the last fifty years. Or, does he just desire to hold fast to one thing that has not changed? Do the same old songs and the same church program help give him a certain sense of security that the changes going on around him have taken away? I believe his slowness in accepting a modern church program is because he fears the removal of this last stand of old community life. When some do accept an up-to-date church program, he often has his fears confirmed by the failure of his pastor and his neighbors to understand why he did not join in.

It is only through a restudy of the Word of God and the presentation of its great truths in the everyday words of the farmer that rural people can keep their feeling of security and, at the same time, promote a church program that will meet the needs of all the people. The first step in such a program is to quit spiritualizing every verse of Scripture. Let it speak its message to people about farming, cattle, sheep, land use, marriage, home, business, vineyards, orchards, and all the rest.

Right here is the first great challenge -- the challenge to the preacher. He needs to be reminded that the Bible is a rural book. The prophets were called from the farm, the sweet singer of Israel from the sheep cote, the leader of armies from the threshing floor. And when He called one from the city (Tarsus), He had to send him to the country to prepare for his mission to the Gentiles. Moses had it easy in the king's palace, but he learned how to follow God's directions in the country. John the Baptist could have remained in the Temple, but God sent him to the country, changed his dress, his mode of living, his way of eating, and his message. Jesus took his disciples to the hillside to teach them the important things.

How proudly a man should say, "I was born in the country." For it has produced many times its share of men and women called for every sort of leadership -- rulers, preachers, teachers, missionaries, scientists, leaders of industry, generals of the army. Each of them needed to thoroughly learn for himself the lessons that can be learned only on the farm -- lessons that will strengthen the will, toughen the hide, and train him in patience, faith, and hope.

In a sense, the most modern program in farming comes from the teachings of the Bible. Purebred cattle were a must, "Let not your cattle gender with another kind." Soil conservation was taught farmers by the prophet of the Lord, "The land shall rest one year in seven." Thanksgiving Day had its beginning in the "Feast of the Harvest." Welfare work was carried on by leaving the "gleanings for the poor." And if we had followed the prophet's advice and raised more sheep (less cotton) and eaten mutton instead of pork, we might have better land, better clothes, and fewer ulcers. Trees were God's first temples. When man destroyed the timber of this country, burning piles of logs and not leaving windbreaks and some shade trees, he lowered the water level and let the soil erode and wash down the river. A trip to the mouth of the Mississippi River, 125 miles south of New Orleans, will show where the production of millions of acres of what was once good land has gone.

Challenge? There is no greater challenge than the challenge of ministering to folks who work the soil that it may bring forth food for the millions on earth and raiment for the dwellers in high places. If preachers could but develop a workable plan of cooperation with agricultural leaders, together we could accomplish more in the next twenty-five years than each of us working

alone can do in the next hundred years. They with their technical knowledge and we giving emphasis to God's part in the scheme of things would form a team that could pull a load too heavy for us to pull separately.

I believe we have a definite responsibility to work out such a plan. Have we allowed the rural community to become so saturated with unholy thinking that many farmers have joined with some of their city cousins in thinking of the church, the preacher, and the Lord as a group who operate on Sunday only?

With the consolidation of schools, the substituting of football for agriculture, and typewriters for home economics, we have said in tones loud and clear, "Move to the towns and cities. Don't even consider farm life." I am persuaded that we rural preachers and leaders -- 4-H, FFA, FHA, home demonstration agents, county agents, and others -- should protest so loudly that our schools will cease to take the farmer's tax dollar to train his child only to move away. It is not fair to the farm child to go to school for twelve years and then have to leave home to make a living, if he uses the things taught him in school. It is not fair either to the farmer who has furnished the child and the dollars.

We have the responsibility to help develop a sense of pride in the community. The average farm boy gives only the name of the county seat or the post office where mail was received as his place of birth. With pride in accomplishments, improvement in living standards, improvement of property, a country boy or girl should proudly say, "I was born in ----- community." A goal should ever be before the youth of the community that will set his place of birth high in his thinking.

We have the responsibility to make the church so attractive that, in spite of the lure of worldly things, men and women and boys and girls will put it first in their plans. The rural church has a great history, but one generation of pygmies in the pulpit, where yesterday giants stood to preach the doctrines of the Book, will completely change the picture. "Uncle Gideon" (Dr. J. B. Gambrell of Pontotoc County, Mississippi) once said to a group of young preachers, "When you go to the city, take your best suit. When you go to the country, take your best sermon." Some of the best preaching in America today is being done by country preachers.

There is the challenge to church members. Members of the church should set Christian standards in farming, cattle raising, and all things pertaining to community life. "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me." The farmer who prays before he goes to the field, who in conversation with neighbors expresses thanks to God for help in raising a crop, who recognizes the laws of God that make good farming possible year after year, will soon have his neighbor saying, "If Christianity will do that to a person, I too should seek until I find it." We are the "living epistles known and read of all" and we should be good reading, not the sort that cannot be sent through the mails.

The right kind of church members will not only raise the spiritual temperature of the community but will lift its social standards and promote its economic welfare. This, in turn, makes it possible for the church to do a better and bigger job, secure the necessary equipment, enlarge its program. Thus the circle enlarges from year to year until the influence of that church is felt round the world. "May you prosper and be in health as your soul prospers." The responsibilities are great.

In the third place, I would mention the church in the rural community as an opportunity. In fact, the most glorious opportunities for unlimited service lie in the rural community. The rural church pastor should be the best informed man in the community. Unless this is true, he will not be able to show the church her opportunities. I would name four great avenues of opportunity that challenge the rural church to develop her people.

1. There is the opportunity to work with other community organizations, such as the Rural Community Development Council and other councils, that they not neglect the spiritual side of life but rather that the spiritual may permeate the whole.

2. There is the opportunity of helping develop youth. But we must have the parents of the community if we are to do a good job, and certainly every country church can and must enlist the parents in worthwhile things. Again, the church can sponsor Boy and Girl Scout troops, a recreation program, a youth revival, a youth week in the church, a vacation Bible school. This is our opportunity also to project the ideals of the church into an ever-widening field as our young people go to consolidated schools, towns, cities, colleges, universities, and into the armed services of the nation.

3. There is the opportunity to help the family. Before we had a church, a government, a school, a club, an organization, we had families and homes. When God wanted us to understand his care for us, he called us his children. Jesus left us words that always thrill, "In my Father's house are many mansions.... I go to prepare a place for you." The opportunity to help establish a Christian home, to lead members of that family to worthwhile Christian living, is the opportunity to bring more happiness to people than a million dollars' worth of entertainment under the brightest lights. Man longs for a home. He toils, plans, schemes, and sometimes goes to a premature grave trying to have a home. Let's help him if we can.

4. There is the opportunity to lead the people into a knowledge and enjoyment of good music. How our souls are filled to overflowing as we listen to great music played or sung. We are reminded that God gave us the organ, the harp, and other instruments to be used in worship. He gave us the grand opera of all time in the 119th Psalm. And in the quietness of the night on some lonely hillside, we may hear in our hearts angelic voices saying, "Glory to God in the highest," so that there is reborn in us all the desire to do good.

No other organization has the opportunity, the responsibility, or the challenge of the church in the rural community. All that other fine organizations offer, the church can pray for and take part in. She must be the salt of the earth to give savor to life and also keep life pure and unspoiled. The greatest challenge, the greatest responsibility, the greatest opportunity is to present the Lord Jesus Christ to country people, to see them born into his kingdom, adopted into his family, baptized into his church, and, justified by his blood, begin to grow in grace and power and good works -- "first the blade, then the stalk, and finally the fruit."

God grant us a rural leadership, beginning with the country preacher and reaching to teachers in the extension department, who believe that the greatest place of service for God and country is the rural church -- men and women capable of holding the rural community under his leadership until his kingdom shall come on earth.